THE MERSHON CENTER at The Ohio State University

Mark Blyth

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"Constructivism and Political Economy: Blissful Union or Shotgun Wedding?"

Thursday, October 27, 2005
12:00 p.m.

Mark Blyth is a political economist who is at the forefront of studies on the role of ideas and uncertainty in politics. He is particularly interested in the recent turn to ideas and constructivist theory in various fields of political science. In his talk at the Mershon Center , he focused on economics and the subfield of international political economy and explored the possibilities and promises of utilizing a constructivist approach in them.

Blyth began his talk by noting two important observations about the state of the scholarship on international political economy. He first argued that there is a discernible shift to constructivism that can potentially tell us a lot about the way political scientists undertake research. He noted that most theories in the discipline tend not very successful in making predictions. The End of the Cold War and World War II are two of the most prominent examples scholars of political science failed to foresee. Similarly, big debates in the discipline tend to disappear almost as rapidly as they arise. Blyth believes these events illustrate a fundamental problem with the underlying concepts and assumptions of most current analyses in political science and international relations.

Blyth said that constructivist theory, on the other hand, offers a different viewpoint to the social world. It differs because constructivists tend to place more emphasis on ideas and uncertainty in place of materialistic and fixed concepts. Blyth argued that interests and meanings are best viewed as constructed by agents and not objectively-based or "given." A second central premise of constructivism is that the world is better analyzed in terms of dynamics rather than comparative statics.

There is a further problem with mainstream approaches, Blyth said. Given the inherent endogenous complexity of the social world we live in, researchers cannot reliably control for the changes that occur in one component, and in turn, they cannot be certain what may cause change in another. The world is also full of uncertainty, not merely risk, which makes post-hoc assessment of agents' strategies inherently problematic for analysts. This uncertain character of social, economic and political surroundings mean we can only talk in terms of unpredictability and contingency, he said. Realizing this as researchers will enable us to accept that stability and institutions designed to achieve it do so in the face of constant change and uncertain. They are themselves social constructions. Institutions and rules that help us order and navigate the world, are therefore, never static, but subject to tension and contestation, nor are they perfect in their design or wholly predictable in their implications, said Blyth.

Being aware of the constructed nature of meaning, stability, and social institutions also has an interesting implication for the dominant mode of thinking in political science and economics today. Material rationality, which posits actors to be rational, self-maximizers with given, objective interests, is best construed as a special case in social scientific analyses rather than a general one when approached from Blyth's perspective.

He argued that one has to distinguish between different phenomena in terms of the degree of uncertainty inherent in an environment. Mathematics can be a powerful tool for analysis in certain research areas in social science. Legislatures with clear actors and determined preferences are one example, where game theory is indeed helpful. But math is ultimately a language and not a technology that applies equally well to all areas. Particularly if one accepts the view that the world is one of uncertainty and indeterminacy, it becomes very difficult to utilize uniform distributions and probabilities as sound representations of the things we analyze in politics or economics as a-priori assumptions.

The social world we live in and analyze as scholars is ultimately a case of too many variables and not many outcomes. Its inherent instability and unpredictability means that we are more surprised by what we see in our observations, and eschew analyses with high levels of generality and determinacy. Given this, we should not necessarily think more data is better, as going farther back in time to include more cases may force us into rigid pictures and away from the actual one where most of the information is to be found in the 'outlier' case, suggested Blyth.

A basic problem we face in social science is that too many variables are attached to any one phenomenon and many different stories can be and are in fact told about it. And perhaps more importantly, what may be formulated as causes at one period in time are not likely to be causes in another period. This is because any given equilibrium point in the social world which we take as our datum is subject to constant change. Our results, however determinate we may hold them to be, may not be projected into the future with as much confidence as we expect from our standard models that assume ergodicity and that there is a 'real' mean to sample for. This is because the stability and meanings we observe are constructed and mediated by agents, which is done so differently in different periods. The very action of moving towards an equilibrium displaces the equilibrium itself. Ideas, norms, and conventions agents have or employ therefore matter more than social scientists usually think them to do in terms of giving the appearance of 'structure' and the resources for change.

Finally, Blyth argued it was also important to keep in mind that unlike in natural sciences, complete independence of subject and object does not apply in social science. As a researcher one must realize that the agents one studies are implicated in the thing s/he samples and studies, and are not separate from it. In the social world, agents' beliefs cause things to happen. If actors happen to believe X will happen, they will undertake actions to make something happen, as is evidenced in dynamics of financial crises, for instance. This is why it is important to note the significant role of ideas and norms. Following this line of this argument, we are also reminded that social phenomena such as the institutions we treat as objective are not given by the system; rather, they are estimates and constructions, i.e. ideas, realized in human or material form.

Constructivists are often accused of being nihilists with an anti-scientific orientation who aim to undermine the very idea of science. But Mark Blyth believes that constructivism is in fact the theory that holds the best promise to salvage social science itself because it forces us to rethink our conceptions, note the limitations in our analysis, and work towards a perhaps more humble and less generalizing, but nonetheless a sounder social science. This is not to claim that actors are non-rational or everything is relative. Rather, by positing the constructed nature of stability or rationality, the constructivist perspective argues that these are to be explained, not taken for granted.

And secondly, it may be more fruitful to approach the unexplained error terms in our analyses as something to be analyzed. In fact, they may contain the most crucial and interesting portion of the explanation as they are likely to surprise the analyst and reader alike. In sum, the world may be more random and contingent than the way social scientists often think. Admitting this will help us as scholars to formulate more durable and sounder theories in social science.

Mark Blyth is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. His research interests lie in the areas of Comparative Political Economy, the Politics of Ideas, and the Politics of Uncertainty. He has been a visiting professor in the UK, France, Germany and Singapore. He is the author of *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002) and is currently working on three projects. The first is a book on party politics and political economy in advanced welfare states called "The New Political Economy of Party Politics." The second is an edited volume on constuctivist theory and political economy entitled "Constructivst Political Economy." The third project is a series of papers on probability, randomness, and epistemology in the social sciences which may or may not end up a book. His most recent articles have appeared in *Comparative Politics, World Politics, Perspectives on Politics, and Western European Politics.*